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STATEMENT BY SENIOR REPRESENTATIVE, SAIGON, INDOCHINA
7 May 1953

It is difficult for us in the field to evaluate the extent to which the information submitted through various channels is read, coordinated and absorbed at headquarters and to what extent headquarters has benefits from the "take" of other reporting agencies. It is very discouraging to read statements of various public officials in the newspapers and to wonder if they have access to any facts at all concerning this situation here. I have for some time been resisting the temptation to send in a summary of the conduct of the war in Indochina because there is so very little, if anything, good which can be said about it. I do not mean by that to reflect in any way on the bravery and the great sacrifices that the troops of the French Union Forces and the Associated States Armies are making here, and in fact, even though I have spent many days in the field with these troops, it is hard even for us who are here on the spot to visualize the hardships which are their everyday fare.

Rather I am speaking of the conduct of the war from the standpoint of overall command. In the past ten years, I have had the opportunity to read a great deal of military history. In fact, I spent over two and a half years doing very little except reading military history. In all of my reading, I find it difficult to think of any single instance where a war has been conducted so poorly. Even the campaigns of the British against the American Colonials during the War of Independence do not compare with the bungling which goes on here, day after day.

During the Laotian campaign which is still going on, the French Command has not failed to violate any given principle of warfare, and what they have done to the principle of mass is absolutely excruciating. With only limited forces at their disposition they have allowed these forces to become separated and divided up into four isolated pockets, each one of which must be completely supplied by air. Not only have they gotten themselves into these separate pockets and therefore taxed their power of air support almost beyond its capabilities, but they have holed up in these places and utterly immobilized their troops, thus allowing the Viet Minh armies to wander almost at will around the countryside.

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Outside of the Red River Delta there has not been a single major engagement during 1953, even though the French have lost a good deal more of North Viet Nam and approximately one third of the state of Laos. I would like to repeat that these losses have been achieved without one single battle having taken place; in fact the only engagement during this period was a small patrol encounter in the vicinity of Moc Cham at the time when the French were slow in withdrawing a reconnaissance unit in the face of the advancing Viet Minh reconnaissance patrols.

The French have simply refused to accept battle even though they have overall superiority in manpower, in fire power and in air power. It was over five months ago that the French battalions found themselves in battle at the airstrip at Na San. Four months ago the covering Viet Minh troops withdrew after having failed to take Na San, and since that time eleven battalions of the French forces have sat there doing absolutely nothing.

Two Viet Minh divisions, battalion by battalion, have marched by Na San at relatively close range without having been harassed in the slightest. These battalions are now retiring from Laos on their way to Phu Tho, and to the best of our knowledge the French have no plans again for using the eleven battalions at Na San to harass the Viet Minh retreat to their major bases at Phu Tho. In ordinary military terms we could say that the Viet Minh forces in Laos were completely cut off. However, in order for troops to be cut off someone has to do the cutting. And this is where the French have failed so miserably. They simply refuse to give battle.

When the two Viet Minh divisions were moving from their bases around Phu Tho into Laos, there was every chance for the French, not necessarily to engage them in an open-pitched battle but to harass their flanks, to make their passage difficult, to strew mines in their paths. The mines were available, they have thousands and thousands of them stockpiled in their Do San underground fortresses and they'll be stockpiled there until Kingdom Come.

The French simply allowed the Viet Minh to march past the battalions they had sitting in their path and proceed into Laos. Meanwhile, they constructed strong defenses, they said, at the town of Sam Neua. In actual fact, General de Linares has told us that as early as February of this year he had decided to evacuate Sam Neua at the time the Viet Minh attacked. He didn't say if the Viet Minh attacked, he said at the time the Viet Minh attacked. He knew from his intelligence that they would attack

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Sam Neua and yet after having made the decision to withdraw, he continued to build, for example, the very costly airstrip in the area with US funds in the amount of approximately half a million dollars.

When the Viet Minh did attack, the French forces in Sam Neua did withdraw. They withdrew very hastily and pellmell. They had apparently mapped out no route of withdrawal, nor had they sent out scouts or set up advance parties, or stockpiled supplies along the route of withdrawal. As a result, what should have been one of the most orderly retreats in this war turned out to be a rout, and only one third of the troops which withdrew from Na San (means Sam Neua) showed up later in the vicinity of Xieng Khouang. The other two thirds may be presumed lost, due to the criminal negligence of the French command in not having planned a retreat which they knew they were going to make two months before the retreat was actually made.

Now, one of the main Viet Minh supply bases is in the vicinity of Thanh Hoa, in the northern part of central Viet Nam. From there the Viet Minh gets the major portion of its supply of food, and there it has a large pool of military manpower. At the beginning of this campaign, it soon became apparent that the Viet Minh was going to move most of its troops out of Thanh Hoa. One division went up to harass the delta in the area of Ninh Binh and the other division moved westward into Laos, leaving the area of Thanh Hoa and Ninh Binh very much exposed and unprotected. Now the French had the capability in manpower and in airborne and sea-borne equipment to launch a very heavy attack in the vicinity of Thanh Hoa, to destroy the Viet Minh bases there, and to prevent the return of this division (304th Viet Minh Division) to its base.

Instead of attacking Thanh Hoa they massed a great many battalions in one of the largest marine flotillas to operate in this war and staged an attack farther south in the vicinity of Phan Thiet, an area where, even had they achieved a great victory over the Viet Minh, it would have had absolutely no effect on the outcome of the campaign in Laos. In the event, however, they achieved something very, very much short of a great victory. Pomander was on that operation; he claims that not a single Viet Minh soldier was killed whereas a great many of the French forces, including quite a few of his own friends, were killed or wounded by mines or by Viet Minh machinegun fire. In addition, 12 armored amphibious craft were left stranded on the beach when the French withdrew, thanks to poor maintenance before they were used on this operation.

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Now, there have been many times during the current campaign when the French could have opposed the Viet Minh with greatly superior forces locally, with greatly superior fire power, and with the full support of fighter aircraft. Not only did they fail to take advantage of these several opportunities which presented themselves, but they apparently purposely split their forces up into such small contingents that wherever they were faced with the Viet Minh they were greatly outnumbered and out-gunned and simply chose to retreat pellmell to get away from the advancing Viet Minh troops. Even under the adverse circumstances which they created for themselves, the least they could have done was to pull their troops to one side, allowing the major Viet Minh columns to pass, and then to harass them and dog their footsteps after the passage, in order to at least slow them down and prevent them from moving at absolute will without any resistance whatsoever.

It is interesting to compare the forces which have been engaged in this campaign. On the Viet Minh side, there were three divisions used, roughly speaking. The three divisions amount to 27 battalions. On the French side, we find five or six battalions bottled up in Lai Chau, supported by airlift. At Na San we find another 11 battalions. At Sam Neua there were five battalions. In the Plaine des Jarres in the vicinity of Xieng Khouang there were seven, at Luang Prabang perhaps another five. That makes a total of 33 French battalions against 27 Viet Minh battalions, but you will note that the largest single assemblage of French battalions is 11 at Na San, whereas the Viet Minh throughout their campaign kept their troops massed and always had at least one division operating as a unit, that is to say nine battalions.

Generally speaking all 27 battalions were well coordinated. The Viet Minh had complete mobility, even though on foot, whereas the French had complete immobility, even though they had this tremendous capacity for airlift, at least tremendous compared to what the Viet Minh have, which is nil, and even though the French have a great many more military vehicles of all types suited for all terrain than do the Viet Minh.

Now the French frequently contend, and this is something that we seem to fall for quite easily, that they'd have the whole thing licked if they just had some more supplies. Within my experience, and I might add that I have access to reports of all US reporting agencies here, this matter of not having enough supplies is a myth, the fact is that they have so many supplies that

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they are stumbling over them. Recently, it will be recalled, the Viet Minh infiltrated a large force about 50 miles behind the French lines to the area of Kien An and blew up one of the largest French dumps in Indochina. I had, by the way, inspected that dump about a year ago and had reported through the attache office and directly to the French command in Hanoi that its security guard was practically nil. Well, after the Viet Minh had succeeded in blowing it up, one of the officers of the French General Staff in Hanoi remarked on how fortunate it was that the explosions had not reached the armored vehicles which were stored there -- I repeat, which were stored there.

This wasn't simply a motor pool; they had so many armored vehicles that they could afford to keep them in storage, and I have seen their motor pools in their depots here in Saigon and, while I cannot quote any figures offhand, it is a vast assembly of materiel which is not being used for combat.

One of their main beefs is about their lack of sufficient airpower, and it is true that they don't have as great an air capability as would be desirable, but on the other hand, they do not have enough maintenance personnel for the air equipment which they now have. The French air force gets about half as many flying hours out of each aircraft as does the US air force. It is simply a matter of ability to maintain and service aircraft, and the French don't have it. Therefore, they cannot use additional aircraft until they are able to supply or until they are willing to accept maintenance personnel from elsewhere.

On the general subject of their capability in airlift, right now as I'm sitting here Al Cox and his boys are doing such a terrific job with such driving enthusiasm that it really hurts to say that what they're doing is useless. I'm afraid it is useless, however, from everything we have been able to determine -- not only useless, but in a certain way fraudulent.

When Admiral Radford was here, a short time ago, General Salan told him that he needed, I think, three C-119's to get the necessary equipment he wanted into Xieng Khouang and Luang Prabang. Admiral Radford immediately asked him, "can the airfields there accommodate them?" and General Salan replied, "yes, they certainly can. In fact, one of your own staff flew over them the other day and said that they were absolutely okay for C-119's." Well, the fact of the matter is that one of Admiral Radford's staff did fly over one of these fields, as stated. However, when he flew over it there was a very thick ground mist

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and the field was at no time observable from the aircraft. This is an eyewitness account of the incident by Lt. Colonel Bob Taber, who was also on that flight and who was present when General Salan made that statement to Admiral Radford at a later date.

So Al and his boys are knocking themselves out along with half the Far East Air Force to get these C-119's into operation, and the whole thing apparently has to slow down now until they are able to bring in parachuting equipment from Japan, because in the event, as could have been predicted, the fields are not useable for C-119's. In fact, now that the rains have started they are not useable for any type aircraft and they have to be completely supplied by air-drop.

Moreover, by the time they drop these three-quarter ton trucks, and the jeeps, and the other heavy equipment into Xieng Khouang, the ground should be such complete quagmire that the gear will bog down and be useless, so that if it should be necessary to evacuate Xieng Khouang it will probably all have to be left behind. And, it might become necessary, because according to the latest intelligence we have, the entire 304th Division intends to spend the rest of the rainy season investing the French position in this area.

Meanwhile, just as a further discouraging note, the Viet Minh were able to march into the French noncomm school where the cadre was being trained for the 54 new Vietnamese battalions which are going to be created this year -- at least we hope are going to be created this year -- and marched off with 500 of these noncomms.

Now all of this sounds utterly incredible, I realize. I find it hard to believe myself, but there it is. All the facts here I can document, and there is no question whatever as to their validity. Maybe you already know them; I hope so. But as I said in the beginning, we never know for sure just how much of this information is getting back and being digested in headquarters, and therefore here it is. This is not intended to be an orderly summary of the campaign of the fall and winter of 1952 and 1953, but simply a sketch to get a few of these things off my mind and to see that they get to the proper people.

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